

Research Brief

Small learning communities

Question: What would models for smaller learning communities look like?

Summary of Findings:

There is minimal research on the schools-within-a-school model, however, the research on small schools is abundant. According to the research, when determining how a school should be structured, some guiding questions should be asked and answered before a program is established. Those questions are listed below. The size of the school and/or program depends on its structure and goals. *Breaking Ranks* states that a school or program should not have more than 600 students. Smaller is only better if the change is systemic and the pedagogy and curriculum met the needs of the students.

Major Findings and Conclusions:

Guiding Questions:

These conversations should be conducted with teachers, staff, students, board of education, community, and business.

1. Who are the clientele?
2. What are the needs of the clientele?
3. What are other schools doing to meet the students' needs?
4. What "exemplary practices" will best meet the needs?
5. What is the mission of the program?

Challenges:

1. Would this lead to tracking?
2. What would happen if a full array of courses could not be offered?
3. What if children from the same family attended different schools?
4. Is the program measuring what it is supposed to be measuring?
5. Would the traditions of the former high school be lost? If so, is that a problem?
6. Would this structure lead to more programmatic transitions for the students?
7. Would the structure be able to be financially be supported?
8. Would the teachers have adequate and appropriate backgrounds to teach their courses?
9. Would teachers be automatically transferred?
10. Would teachers lose seniority?
11. What would the faculty course loads be?

Strengths:

1. Stronger student accountability and responsibility for their own learning.
2. More able to use portfolio and performance-based assessment.
3. School would be safer, as strangers can be more easily recognized.
4. Students have more opportunities to develop socially and academically.
5. Students will have a better chance of being known well by at least one adult.
6. Better attendance.
7. Better behavior, less discipline issues and problems.
8. Increased teacher satisfaction.
9. Teachers have smaller class sizes, allow teachers to develop a more personalized program.
10. Teachers can learn from and be supported by each other.
11. Teachers are more empowered for the program.

Different Structures:

1. School-within-a-school: Often specialized programs, like a science or arts magnet. They are house separately from the regular program.
2. Vertical-house plans: There are several plans. Each grade level is placed in a house and they share all of their teachers. Each house has all of the grade levels and each is a mini-school. Each house has all of the grades and the students are looped.
3. Alternative schools: A separate physical setting from the high school, where students who do not fit into the traditional program would attend school, sometimes for part of the day and might work the other part of the day.
4. Career academies: Similar to the house system, but students are studying in fields in which they feel they may want to pursue.
5. Themed schools: Much like a special magnet school, where the school's program revolves around a specific theme, i.e. natural sciences.
6. Charter schools: These schools tend to have been part of a public school system. Often they are developed by parents and/or teachers. They are an alternative to the public school but are held to the same accountability standards.

Online Resources:

- *Breaking Ranks: A framework for secondary reform project*
A description of the process used in Vermont in conjunction with the Northeast and Islands Regional Education Lab and Brown University is offered.

http://www.lab.brown.edu/programs/lab2000/secondary_breaking.shtml#Data

<http://www.educationpartnerships.org/>

- Brown, M. H. *Breaking Ranks: Blueprints for futures schools*
This article provides the major themes that are present in Breaking Ranks. There is also a description of the roles that the principals, students, and teachers should play in the 21st century.
http://alliance.ed.uiuc.edu/email/list-archive/IAES_1996-97_119.html
- A School within a School
This describes a 9th grade program called Cornerstone. The purpose of this program is to hook 9th graders into school so they will have better chance of graduating.
http://www.sptimes.com/2003/08/27/Neighborhoodtimes/A_school_within_a_sch.shtml
- Charter Schools in Perspective
An overview of charter schools is provided in this article.
<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/charter/chap1.html>
- Innovative School Design for Small Learning Communities
The importance of creating a program first by examining pedagogy and values, then the physical environment is outlined.
http://www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/208
- Organizing schools into small learning communities
Items to consider when establishing smaller learning environments is provided.
<http://www.ericdigests.org/2002-4/schools.html>
- Overview of Charter Schools
A synopsis of charter schools is provided in this article.
http://www.uscharterschools.org/pub/uscs_docs/o/index.htm
- Small School's Project
This includes information on initial support for small schools.
<http://www.smallschoolsproject.org/index.asp?siteloc=aboutus>
- Small Schools Workshops
Information about conferences and references on developing and supporting small schools is included.
<http://www.smallschools.com/>
- The School-within-a-School Model

A definition of a school-within-a-school model is provided. This also includes pluses and minuses for this type of structure.

http://www.ericfacility.net/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed438147.html

- *What the research shows*

This is a synopsis of the research findings from some schools that have implemented some and/or all of the recommendations from Breaking Ranks. There is a separate section for each overarching theme.

http://www.nassp.org/s_nassp/search_research.asp?CID=202&DID=6655

Schools:

- Chicago Vocational Career Academy

<http://www.cvca.cps.k12.il.us/>

- Churchill High School

<http://www.chs.lane.edu/school/minischools/>

- Mountlake Terrace High School

5 small high school programs in one physical facility

<http://www.edmonds.wednet.edu/mths/SlcPage/schedules.htm>

- Urban Academy, Manhattan, NY

<http://www.urbanacademy.org/>

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